CBS REPORTS

"You And The Commercial"

as broadcast over the

CBS TELEVISION NETWORK

Thursday, April 26, 1973

10:00 - 11:00 PM, EST

With CBS News Correspondent Charles Kuralt

PRODUCED BY CBS NEWS

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Perry Wolff

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CHARLES KURALT: Wait a minute, don't turn it off! These are not the commercials before the broadcast. This is the broadcast, and it's about commercials.

If you're an ordinary American, you probably don't think you're influenced by advertising. You may remember a bit of a jingle they use to sell products or get annoyed about too many commercials, but when it comes to buying things, you really make your own independent judgments. Or do you?

Twenty-three billion dollars a year is spent on advertising. Advertisers wouldn't be spending that if you and your children weren't buying. You may think advertising is simply the clever inspiration of the ad man, but there's a sophisticated industry behind these messages. Virtually every one of the commercials flashing by is the result of someone examining the mind of America, examining successfully and selling successfully.

We've spent a long time looking at a lot of television advertising. Perhaps you think you're not influenced by it. Our premise is that you may be, in ways you may never have imagined. That's what this broadcast is about.

[Excerpt from Alka-Seltzer commercial]

ANNOUNCER: CBS REPORTS: "You And The Commercial" with CBS News Correspondent Charles Kuralt.

KURALT: The television commercial is the answer to the salesman's dream: the ability to demonstrate the product to millions of customers at once. With television, the salesman moved into the living room and made himself at home in virtually all our homes.

Today, it's the commercial that has fixed attention on advertising. Advertisers say that, for all its cost and complexity, the commercial is the cheapest, fastest and most dramatic way to reach the most people. That is why tonight our primary concern is not with the newspaper or magazine or radio ad, but with the commercial seen on network television, our common experience.

Advertising is an industry that in America has become an institution. Philharmonic Hall in New York City. It is the night of the 13th Annual Clio Awards, a gold-plated cousin of the Oscar and the Emmy. It's awarded the best commercials on television. In America in the age of television, this is a cultural event, one that Hollywood would understand.

[Excerpt from Clio Awards ceremonies]

This night is a celebration of the wit, style and artistry of advertising. But the fact is, advertising, for all the elegance of Philharmonic Hall, is one of the hardest games in America.

Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. This is Preview House, run by Audience Studies, Incorporated.

AUDIENCE SURVEYOR: At this time we would like to get your reaction to a very brief series of TV commercials . . .

KURALT: It too is a theater - and a laboratory where the public is analyzed every night of the week. These people are the raw data of a new science, sometimes called "psychographics" - the science of salesmanship.

AUDIENCE SURVEYOR: . . . the electronic impulses from them go out to a computer and from the computer we get a series of charts. And later on this evening, after the program's over, we'll sit down with the charts and we can tell the points of the shows you liked, as well as the parts you didn't like, too.

[Excerpt from Di-Gel commercial]

KURALT: Advertising research is a combination of psychology, sociology and statistics. It is the work of modern alchemists to transform metal and soap and soft drinks into the gold of sales. The payoff is in the movement of the needle, the response of the audience to the commercial.

[Excerpt from Di-Gel commercial]

CLIO PRESENTER: For best toys and games . . .

KURALT: The payoff in Philharmonic Hall is a Clio for the most successful movies ever made, movies that are seen by a larger audience than ever saw "Gone With the Wind," that in cash return are often bigger box office than "The Godfather."

CLIO PRESENTER: For best confections and snacks: Howard Rosenman accepting for Benton & Bowles, New York.

For best pharmaceuticals . . .

KURALT: Its very success, as art and as science, has focused attention on advertising and has made the workings of a private business into a growing public issue.

[Excerpt from Alka-Seltzer commercial]

CLIO PRESENTER: For best soft drinks - and this winning commercial receives two Clios - here, ladies and gentlemen, is . . .

KURALT: This is not a tale of just two cities, for across America, wherever there's a television set or radio, a magazine or newspaper, a billboard, the art and science of advertising meet.

[Excerpt from Coca-Cola commercial]

KURALT: This commercial was the hit of the 1972 Clio Awards. But the real story is backstage, behind the scenes of a $23-billion industry that is as much a part of our lives as it is our folklore.

Especially on television, advertising is bigger than ever. Today it dwarfs even Madison Avenue: nearly 6,000 agencies selling products around the world. The names are familiar from Broadway to Bangkok, a roster of the modern American salesmen: J. Walter Thompson, biggest agency of all; Ted Bates; McCann-Erickson; Doyle Dane Bernbach; Ogilvy and Mather; Benton & Bowles; and Burnett.

This is not Madison Avenue but Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Leo Burnett is the fourth largest advertising agency in the world, with billings close to $500-million. Leo Burnett's philosophy is that the agency is a business partner of the client who makes the product and that what every product needs is an image, a personality. You may never have heard of Leo Burnett, but you probably have heard of Tony the Tiger, Morris the Cat, the Jolly Green Giant and the Marlboro Man. That is no accident.

AD AGENCY STAFF MEMBER: I think this one's pretty good. I think Bernie did a good job on the retouchings. Got enough of the single proof . . .

KURALT: Marlboro may be just another cigarette, but the Marlboro Man is an image that worked, that transformed a low-selling woman's filter cigarette into a high-selling he-man brand, now the second most popular cigarette in America.

This is what you see, what is familiar to you, the art of advertising. What you don't see - behind the doors marked Pupilometrics, Psychometric Viewing, Commercial Viewing - is the science of advertising. The advertising agency has been called one of the most advanced laboratories in psychology. There is market research and motivational research, demographics and psychographics. It is estimated that some 500 companies are being paid a billion dollars a year for advertising and marketing research. Even more than the agency, it's the client who wants to know what makes advertising work. They're all here, at Gallup & Robinson in Princeton, New Jersey. The same George Gallup!

[Commercial excerpt]

KURALT: Advertisers say they don't know which ads work, but they're constantly trying to find out. This is one way to measure commercials: what Gallup-Robinson calls Total Prime Time Testing.

[Excerpts of commercials]

KURALT: Every commercial on network television is carefully monitored. The following day, their effectiveness will be measured in hundreds of telephone interviews.

[Commercial excerpt]

KURALT: Gallup-Robinson calls this "battlefield conditions." That's how the advertiser sees it too. He is waging a campaign, complete with strategies and tactics. His weapon is the commercial. His target is the competition - and you, the consumer. The advertiser is being armed for the battle of the marketplace with answers to questions like: What went through your mind as you watched the commercial? The advertiser tried to increase your interest in buying his product. Did he succeed?

Success for the advertiser does not necessarily depend on whether you like the commercial but on whether you remember it. This kind of testing can tell him that. What the consumer tells the advertiser is remembered and stored in the files of every corporation that advertises.

AUDIENCE SURVEYOR: Would you raise your hand if you'd like a little more time?

KURALT: Whoever you are, wherever you live, whatever you spend, you belong to a target audience at which the advertiser is taking aim. At Audience Studies Incorporated in Hollywood, your recall of the commercial is only one of the measurements being taken. These dials feed into a computer what you think about the commercial: your conscious response. Finger sensors feed the computer what you feel: your unconscious response to the commercial. In the end, a good commercial is one that sells the product. And to move the merchandise, advertisers believe, first they must move the emotions.

AUDIENCE SURVEYOR: Will all of you holding dials set your pointers back to the center normal position there, please, and we'll show you the first of these very brief TV commercials.

[Excerpt from Pepsi-Cola commercial]

KURALT: The questionnaires, the dials, the sensors: they are three parts of the consumer portrait being charted here.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the product?

AUDIENCE: Pepsi. Pepsi-Cola.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, Pepsi.

KURALT: The fourth is the discussion, or focus, group - now as widespread in advertising research as the telephone call.

INTERVIEWER: Miss Six?

MISS SIX: I like the music.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, we'll get back to that. Miss Three, what was your first thought?

MISS THREE: I like the children and the animals, you know. Everyone likes children. They "ah" and "ooh" . . .

INTERVIEWER: Right! Did they say anything in that music?

WOMAN: The "Pepsi generation" is what you can remember most.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

WOMAN: I believe it said, "Pepsi helps you come alive," or something to that effect.

GIRL: "A whole new way of living!"

KURALT: It is possible that in no other way are Americans so carefully studied than as consumers, no matter what their age. These children are ages nine, ten and eleven. They too are in a focus group paid for by advertisers. An estimated $400-million a year is spent on advertising to children.

The client observes from behind a one-way mirror. He could be a toy, candy or cereal manufacturer. On this day, it's the Stride-Rite Shoe Company of Boston. Behind the mirror is the tape machine, recording everything said by child, client or Gene Reilly, head of this research firm specializing in children, one of many across the country.

REILLY: This business that we have here is all about collecting information. And we do this in a variety of ways. Sometimes we sit and talk with people like you and sometimes we ask if we can talk to you in your homes, and sometimes we even do it by telephone.

KURALT: It is estimated that the average child sees 25,000 commercials a year - 220 minutes of commercials each week. He spends more time before a television set than before his school teacher.

[Excerpt from Stride-Rite commercial]

REILLY: What were some of the things about that commercial that you thought were good? What were some of the things about it that you sort of liked? Yes?

BOY: Well, I sort of like the way the music went to the feet.

REILLY: The music?

BOY: Yes.

REILLY: Specifically, how did you like it? I mean, it had a-- what?

BOY: It had a really action feeling.

REILLY: Good! That's a good way to put it. All right! The action feeling of the music. Something else? Michelle?

MICHELLE: It had like rhyming words in it.

REILLY: It had what, dear?

MICHELLE: Rhyming words in it.

REILLY: Ah, it had rhyming words in it!

BOY: I think the background was great, like with the ocean and then the country and the city and all the different kinds of places that it was filmed in.

KURALT: It was sociologist David Riesman who once described the American child as "consumer trainee." This kind of research is also used to test ideas that become commercials.

It seems research often tells advertisers that entertainment, not information, sells best. Here is the making of a 30-second entertainment.

[Excerpt from Pontiac commercial]

KURALT: In this New York studio, two versions of a commercial are being filmed, with all the preparation and skill of a Hollywood production.

[Honking of horn]

KURALT: Enter, the star! A 1973 Pontiac. Waiting on stage: the supporting cast - the Pontiac dealers of New York and New Jersey. On the tape is the rest of the cast: a professional group of singers has recorded the music. Their voices will be the ones actually heard in the commercial, conducted by the same musical director, the man in the middle.

MUSICAL DIRECTOR: The Pontiac choir boys build to a swell: E-I-E-I-O, cut!

REHEARSAL COORDINATOR: Cut!

DIRECTOR: Then we go to this: [sings] "If your old car, she ain't what she used to be, she ain't what she used to be . . ." Now, let them sing, "I'm just the guy to see." Let them sing!

COORDINATOR: Our important thing is critical. We're taking it segment by segment. It's important, critical, that we get the first word, "your," together. And the best way to do it is to-- so that you know what I'm doing, it's: One, two, one-two-three! "Your Pont--" Now, try that! I'm going to do: One, two, one-two-three!

CHORUS: Your Pontiac.

COORDINATOR: Your Pontiac. One, two, one-two!

CHORUS: Your Pontiac choir boys' deals are swell.

COORDINATOR: Beautiful! Once more.

SOLOIST [singing]: A Pontiac today . . .

KURALT: These are professionals, remember, and what they're trying to do is sell you a car. Pontiac last year sold 756,000 cars.

MUSIC DIRECTOR: My eyes amaze me. Top, sound playback, please!

COORDINATOR: Try a little bit replay! One, two, one!

CHORUS: [Singing Pontiac song]

MUSIC DIRECTOR: I think they're hot. Top of "Old Gray Mare"!

KURALT: There are many ways to sell a car: on the basis of price, styling, safety, or with a new lyric for an old children's song.

[Excerpt from Pontiac commercial]

KURALT: This commercial has cost $20,000 to make. It will cost hundreds of thousands more to broadcast.

[Excerpt from Pontiac commercial]

KURALT: For $250,000 - the most expensive commercial ever made: Ann Miller and chorus in supporting roles. Choreography by Busby Berkeley.

[Excerpt from Great American Soup commercial]

KURALT: To make a feature film at the same rate would cost $30-million.

[Excerpt from Great American Soup commercial]

[Excerpt from Vel commercial featuring Ethel Merman]

[Excerpt from Rice Krispies commercial]

[Excerpt from 7-Up commercial]

KURALT: Whatever his reputation in satire and expose, the ad man is no mere huckster. He uses every tool he can find, every dollar he can get, to sell a 25-cent can of soup.

[Excerpt from Great American Soup commercial]

[Excerpt of macaroni commercial]

ANNOUNCER: CBS REPORTS: "You And The Commercial" continues with Charles Kuralt.

[Music]

KURALT: You have been questioned, studied and analyzed. Now you must be sold. There is more to the commercial than meets the eye. It meets the ear, too: a litany of superlatives and promises that in advertising is called "puffery."

[Montage of commercial claims]: "Introducing" "New" "New" "New" "New" "Perfect" "Great" "Pure" "Comfortable" "Effective" "Soft" "Permanent" "Recommended" "Cleaner" "Dazzling" "New" "Safer" "Faster" "New" "First" "New" "Fresh" "Younger" "Lighter" "Better" "Whiter" "Prettier" "Richer" "Juicier" "Hearty" "Exciting" "Better" "Extra" "Special" "Clean" "Brightest" "Spotless" "New" "New" "New" "New" "Best" "Luxury" "Revolutionary" "All-new Tide power" "Special formula" "Exclusive formula really works" "Really different" "Unusually good" "Sparkling clean" "Best for a thousand and one cleaning jobs" "And if that's not the absolute truth, we invite any or all of our competitors to sue us."

KURALT: That kind of challenge has been taken up in recent years, not by competitors but by the Federal Trade Commission, the government agency whose job is to regulate advertising.

Advertisers spend millions to analyze their ads. At the FTC, television and print ads are also analyzed by government monitors, two of them. The Commission's budget for regulating advertising is slightly more than $5-million - the same amount spent in one year to advertise Cheerios.

For years, the FTC has been the target of consumer complaints that it wasn't doing enough. Now business is complaining it's doing too much. One reason is a new program requiring companies to prove their claims. In 10 product categories, including automobiles, soaps and detergents, cough and cold remedies, the FTC has asked for documentation. These 4,000 pages contain some of the results. An FTC staff report has found almost two-thirds of the data either inadequate to support the claims or too technical for anyone but an expert to understand.

With thousands of claims competing for the consumer's attention, there are bound to be excesses. There have been.

[Excerpt from Rapid-Shave commercial]

KURALT: Colgate-Palmolive kicked off an ad campaign for Rapid-Shave in 1959. The Federal Trade Commission - and ultimately the Supreme Court - blew the whistle. The sandpaper used in the demonstration was not sandpaper but sand spread over a sheet of plexiglass.

[Excerpt from Rapid-Shave commercial]

[Excerpt from Libby-Owens-Ford/General Motors commercial]

KURALT: This demonstration for an automobile window was simpler: distortion here; none here. Because the window is rolled down. This

ad campaign by Libby-Owens-Ford Glass and General Motors was finally stopped in 1963, five years after it was first broadcast.

[Excerpt from Geritol commercial]

KURALT: For years Geritol gave Americans this answer for tiredness. But the FTC ruled that Geritol was not a remedy for tiredness and might only help a tiny percentage of Americans. The J.B. Williams Company and its ad agency are appealing an $812,000 fine for violating FTC orders to stop deceptive advertising.

[Excerpt from Geritol commercial]

KURALT: There is something in this ad for Campbell's Soup you don't see: the marbles at the bottom of the bowl. They were placed there to push the soup's ingredients to the top of the bowl. Campbell's and its agency, B.B.D.&O., agreed to change the ads in 1970.

[Excerpt from "Johnny Lightning" commercial]

KURALT: This is deceptive, said the FTC. It was charged that the camera, sound and editing techniques falsely represented the size, speed and sound of these toy cars, made by the Mattel and Topper Companies. There are now rules against making toy commercials this way.

[Excerpt from toy car commercial]

KURALT: The Federal Trade Commission has demonstrated concern not just with truth in advertising, but with the impact of advertising, especially on children. An ad, says the FTC, may be literally true but still be misleading or unfair to the consumer. And, says the FTC, the differences between many products are often only in the way they are advertised.

Both government and business agree that these issues may be settled by the case of Wonder Bread.

ROBERT PITOFSKY [Former Director, FTC Bureau of Consumer Protection]: The Commission's allegations there are that all fortified breads - and Wonder Bread is a fortified bread - are approximately the same as a result of government standards, and therefore that these uniqueness claims on the part of the product - that this product is especially nutritious - are deceptive.

KURALT: When this interview was filmed, Robert Pitofsky was Director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. He was interviewed by Producer Irv Drasnin.

PITOFSKY: In that case, the Wonder Bread case, a charge is made that the advertising overreaches particularly vulnerable groups and-- and there the staff will try to make out a case that children concerned about their eventual growth and health and athletic prowess are

particularly vulnerable to a claim that one product, as opposed to another, will allow them to achieve good growth or athletic skills.

[Excerpt from Wonder Bread commercial]

ARCHIE FOSTER: The argument is that this infers, this sort of advertising infers exclusivity.

KURALT: Archie Foster is chairman of the Ted Bates advertising agency, fifth largest in the world. The Bates agency, which has a long history of cases examined by the FTC, is the agency for Wonder Bread.

FOSTER: You see, in the Wonder Bread case-- and incidentally, I shouldn't really be talking about this, because it's on appeal. But I think I'm free to comment in the broadest sense about it. If it is seen to be possibly misleading to state the bald truth about your product, then the consequences to advertising are very large.

KURALT: One remedy for what the Commission considers to be misleading advertising is corrective advertising.

DRASNIN: What do you mean by corrective advertising?

PITOFSKY: That's the notion that a company must go back to consumers in the same media it used previously and rectify, set the record straight, with respect to possible deceptions.

KURALT: Was it fair to you and useful to the consumer for the government to require you to run corrective advertising for Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice and Profile Bread?

FOSTER [chuckling]: That was a rather special case. We used a word in the Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice Cocktail. I believe the word was "food energy".

[Excerpt from Ocean Spray commercial]

FOSTER: The Federal Trade Commission thought that this could be misconstrued, misunderstood, by the consuming public to mean vitamins and minerals and all that sort of thing. Actually, the government-approved definition of food energy is calories, which is what we meant.

[Excerpt from Ocean Spray corrective commercial]

FOSTER: And the corrective advertising says what we intended to say and what we did say, namely that food energy is-- is calories. So, it's an-- it's an example of-- to a degree changing the rules. And under those circumstances, I don't think corrective advertising is fair. There was nothing wrong with that commercial until the rules were changed.

KURALT: But you'd never-- I mean, no copywriter would ever write this product gives you more calories than any other. "Food energy" was a euphemism, right?

FOSTER: Well, I'm not sufficiently current with that commercial to-- Could have, could have. I don't believe it would have damaged the commercial.

KURALT: Are you influenced, yourself, by commercials on television?

FOSTER: I'm sure I am. Yes. I see a new deodorant and I try it. Yes. I-- I'm a sucker for good advertising with a good promise that I'll be happier.

KURALT: A well-known showman said, "We are all-- we are all suckers."

FOSTER: Hm-hmm!

KURALT: Is that-- is that your constituency? Are you talking to suckers?

FOSTER: We're all interested in what we can do with our discretionary income. We're spending it for something. Now, we should be interested in new options, other ways of getting the satisfactions that we want from the various products. That's what we buy. We don't buy the product; we buy the satisfaction that the product will give us. And that's essentially what advertising should portray.

KURALT: The FTC is also interested in a kind of advertising you probably have never seen: the counter-commercial.

DRASNIN: Mr. Pitofsky, in what product categories does the Commission feel it is appropriate to have counter-commercials or counter-advertising?

PITOFSKY: Well, principally those product categories in which the advertising message leaves something important out. Now, for example, automobiles are frequently sold on the basis of quick getaway and size and that sort of thing, but rarely is anything said about death on the highways, safety hazards, that sort of thing. And the Commission's notion was that some amount of time - could be five minutes a week - be put aside by the networks, during which responsible consumer-- consumer groups could come in and discuss these other sides of controversial questions.

[Excerpt from automobile counter-commercial]

KURALT: Counter-commercials like this one never have been seen on network television. The networks say they are not fair because they are proposed for TV only - not newspapers or magazines - and that the issues raised by counter-commercials are better handled by network news broadcasts. Besides auto safety, other subjects for counter-ads have included headache remedies and nutrition.

[Excerpt from automobile counter-commercial]

DRASNIN: The FTC has supported the idea of counter-advertising. How do advertisers feel about that?

PETER ALLPORT [President, Association of National Advertisers]: We feel very, very disturbed about that. We think it would very seriously damage the process of advertising, hence the process of selling.

KURALT: Peter Allport is President of the Association of National Advertisers, which represents virtually every major advertiser.

ALLPORT: If I'm an advertiser and I'm threatened with counter-advertising and I want to stay in television - I've got commitments to stay, a contract, whatever - my directions to my advertising agency would be: "Say nothing! Let's not get into this mess! Let's not make any specific claims for the product. Let's just stay with puffery, which is less informative than a specific claim." You would drive the advertiser into a position where he just wouldn't say anything.

KURALT: CBS News asked six of the nation's biggest advertisers to discuss advertising for this broadcast. Procter & Gamble, which spends more than anyone else to advertise ($275-million a year), declined to be interviewed. So did General Foods, which spends $160-million a year to advertise; and Warner-Lambert, $128-million; Bristol-Myers, $110-million; Colgate-Palmolive, $110-million; and American Home Products, which spends $106-million a year to advertise. All declined to be interviewed. One company, Procter & Gamble, said it would consider an interview only if CBS News submitted its questions in advance. Peter Allport spoke for the companies.

ALLPORT: I'm not surprised and I must say I sympathize with them. People in well-managed companies - in the companies that you and I would like to invest in and like to buy the products of - are inherenly cautious. And they should be. And they have-- The reputations of their companies are very, very dear to them, and should be. CBS News has got a rule which may or may not be advisable (I'm not judging that) that you may not see the questions in advance and that you have no way of editing or participating in how the answers are used. This is probably a good thing. But it is a very inhibiting thing.

DRASNIN: It's not just a CBS News policy.

ALLPORT: Well, it's a general news policy, let's say, of all the networks.

DRASNIN: The reluctance seems to go beyond giving an interview to CBS News. The American Management Association recently tried to conduct a survey of advertising and marketing executives about advertising practices and barely 10 percent responded.

ALLPORT: I would think that 10 percent response would be very low, very low indeed. I would have to feel that either the survey was very poorly drawn or the distribution of it was not professionally handled. I'm at a loss for words. If that is a fact - that they sent out a survey, a questionnaire, and had as that-- such a response - that's remarkable.

KURALT: We also asked Mr. Allport about a Harvard Business Review survey in which 60 percent of the business executives responding said they believed that advertising does not present a true picture of the product.

ALLPORT: If I remember that survey correctly, some of the phraseology and the way the questions were presented would almost force that kind of an answer. I'm a great believer in advertising, but if you ask me: "Is every ad true? Does advertising always--?" I would have to say no. There are always people who will buy the Brooklyn Bridge. And as long as that happens, there's always, unfortunately, somebody who's going to try to sell it to them.

ARCHIE FOSTER: I believe that the free enterprise system could not function without advertising. You couldn't bring new products to market. No one would ever stock one if you weren't going to create some sort of demand for it.

PITOFSKY: What is the use of allowing a system in which companies, instead of producing a better car or a better tire or a better detergent or better food or drug, just come up with a better advertising campaign as a substitute for that? I believe that accurate advertising is essential to make the competitive system work.

KURALT: Do you think there's justification for spending $22-billion a year, or whatever it is we spend, on trying to persuade people to buy this brand instead of that brand?

FOSTER: You see, I come back to the premise that I rely on and that is that this is simply a display case offering the products of America's economy to the public. If there were not advertising, I don't know how you'd know about that new car that performs in a better way or that new cake mix, or even that new dog food with cheese in it, I love that one! How else would you do it and protect the free-choice system which obtains in this country? It's not $22-million [sic] of massive persuasion; it's $22-billion of offering the nation's products to the people for their choice.

KURALT: You make it sound simple.

FOSTER: It is simple.

PITOFSKY: People tend to think of advertising abuses as frivolous nonsense and efforts to regulate it as over-reacting. I think that's wrong. In product category after product category, there are five, 10 or 15 different companies in the market and yet their rivalry does

not produce lower prices or improve products or, indeed, does not produce a situation in which consumers are provided with the information they need to make choices. What's the use of having 15 different companies in the market if they're all saying the same thing and much of what they say is either not truthful or irrelevant?

KURALT: We have talked about the advertiser who tries to sell his product with commercials and the advertising agency which creates the commercials. What about the networks which carry the commercials? Herminio Traviesas is vice-president of Broadcast Standards for NBC.

TRAVIESAS: Every commercial - and by the way, last year we reviewed over 36,000 different commercials - every commercial that comes in with a claim, we ask for substantiation. A substantiation might be in terms of a laboratory report. Now, when that comes in, obviously we're not all experts here. I have a staff; the total staff of Broadcast Standards is 36 people. We have a research director that works for NBC. He knows methodology and he knows whether two and two makes four. If it doesn't, he comes back and asks us questions. We go back to the advertiser or the advertising agency. This might take two or three months before we finally come to a conclusion that either the copy has to be changed to match the substantiation or we throw it out completely.

KURALT: Can you say that every commercial the public sees on NBC is truthful?

TRAVIESAS: As far as we're concerned - and I can say this for the other two networks, because they have the same staff with, you know, the same set-up; they review the same commercials - we do not put on anything on the air that we don't honestly believe can be substantiated that it's truthful.

KURALT: Well, if that is so, how come there have been examples of just outright fraud in television commercials in years past?

TRAVIESAS: Well, when you say fraud, you know, that's a pretty broad statement.

KURALT: Well, I mean fraud! I mean, you know, shaving that piece of plexiglass instead of sandpaper, and so on.

TRAVIESAS: Oh! Fine! Again, I just told you: When that happened, we honestly believed it was truthful. We do make mistakes. The other thing that you must remember, Charles, is that we also are part of an industry code, which also is a governing factor. We call it the NAB Code Authority and I'm a member of that. And so, therefore, the industry has certain rules and guidelines that we all, who are members of the code, abide by.

KURALT: Whether the networks' self-policing is all that it should be has been a matter of controversy among the public and the government and the special-interest groups for 30 years. It still is.

ANNOUNCER: CBS REPORTS: "You And The Commercial" continues with Charles Kuralt.

[Music: "The Marlboro Theme"]

KURALT: American businessmen pride themselves on their ability to find out what the American consumer wants and needs: on knowing the customer. But that special province of probing the human mind does not belong to the field of advertising and marketing research alone. It also belongs to the psychologists and social critics who are outside the advertising industry. Therefore, we thought it appropriate to consult Dr. Erich Fromm, whose scientific work makes him a respected observer of man and his institutions. Dr. Fromm agreed to look at a variety of television commercials, old and new, with producer Drasnin and to talk about them.

DRASNIN: Dr. Fromm, how would you analyze some of the commercials you've just seen?

FROMM: Well, of course, in the first place: fear. This is very apparent in all the deodorants' ads: fear of body odor and all that. But in a more subtle way, the general fear of not being loved and then to be able, by some product, to be loved.

[Excerpt of commercial]

FROMM: That's a subtle fear pervading most people. And the ads speculate on that and show, in more or less drastic ways, here are the things which will make you loved.

[Excerpt from Ultra Brite commercial]

[Excerpt from Maxim coffee commercial]

[Excerpt from Certs breath-mint commercial]

FROMM: All that is sought to these unconscious fears. The second thing which struck me was the concept of the miracle. The miracle drugs! Something, some miracle, will happen.

[Excerpt from Safeguard soap commercial]

FROMM: That is to say, the general theme is: Love is dependent on a gadget. And this is a very potent theme in our whole modern life: the expectation that not human power, human effort, not being, but gadgets create the good life and that there is really no limit to what a gadget can do.

The product promises us the fountain of youth, eternal youth. There's a great deal of narcissism in this involved, the self-image of the beautiful person, good-looking, strong, attractive, who never changes, who lives in a kind of sacred land in which this image of the beautiful, successful, energetic young man is never touched. The pretension must be that he never changes.

DRASNIN: The Federal Trade Commission describes the purpose of advertising as providing the consumer with enough information to make a rational decision in the marketplace. Do you think advertising does that?

FROMM: On the contrary, I would say our ads, by and large, tend to misinform the reader and not to make him think rationally, but irrationally. You might speak of side effects, as one speaks of a medicine, of dangerous side effects which advertisings have. And maybe the side effects are just as powerful as whatever the good effect of advertising is supposed to be.

DRASNIN: What are the side effects of advertising?

FROMM: They have an effect beyond that of informing the reader about products and commodities, of molding the character of the public, of molding personality, just as school and church and family do. Advertising tends to make a person greedy, to create the man who wants more and more, instead of trying to be more and more. Thinking - rational thinking, critical thinking, independent thinking - is undermined. That advertising is-- does not try to inform and convince, but to suggest in a semi-hypnotic way.

[Excerpt from Noxzema commercial]

[Excerpt from Dial commercial]

FROMM: There's a tremendous difference between convincing and suggesting. Convincing is a matter of showing good rational argument. Suggesting is demagogic. Suggesting tries to break down first the rationality and critical sense of the person and then to force him to accept any nonsense which I am saying, or which the advertiser says to him, or which the politician says to him. This is done by the fact that either simply that he is told, "Buy this!" Or take another ad which is in the newspapers, not in these commercials here: "Fly me!"

[Excerpt from National Airlines commercial]

DRASNIN: How would you analyze that commercial, where the girl says, "Fly me"?

FROMM: Well, by a slight change of letters. And I think that is its meaning. And that is not even so unconscious. One doesn't even need a specialist in symbolic language for that. But it is just an attempt to shift the argument completely from the value of an airline to a sexual allusion. Since there is very little love in our society, sex plays a tremendous role.

[Excerpt from Groom and Clean commercial]

[Excerpt from Aqua Velva commercial]

FROMM: Now, here comes a very important question. One may ask, "Do people really believe what the ad says?" Well, it seems to me the

answer is yes and no. They know that these claims of the drugs and of the food and of the pills and of the various cigarettes are all nonsense, but at the same time they would like to wish, they would like to hope, that there might be something to it. And so they have an experience which is not clearly that of differentiating between reality and fantasy, but reality and fantasy become mixed up.

[Excerpt from Mustang commercial]

[Excerpt from For Brunettes Only commercial]

[Excerpt from Bounty cooking sauce commercial]

[Music]

FROMM: In this peculiar mixture of reality and fantasy is what people like, what people indulge in, and it is what the advertising promotes. People lose their sense of reality. Life and death, possible, impossible, peace and war: everything becomes unreal, everything becomes a half-fantasy. And at that point man ceases to respond to reality. He is ready to believe everything or nothing. And, in fact, I think that is largely the case with people today.

DRASNIN: Is advertising a reflection of all this, or is it at least partly responsible for it?

FROMM: I think it is both. It would be foolish to accuse the advertising people for poisoning the mind of the American public. They do what they have to do under the given rules and mechanisms of our mode of production and consumption. With our mode of consumption, and production especially - big corporations - the taste of the public must be manipulated. It must be made foreseeable. Otherwise, the big mammoth enterprise couldn't exist. And advertising is one of the means to do this.

DRASNIN: I suppose that an advertiser or an advertising man would say that you're taking advertising too seriously, that the people don't take it that seriously.

FROMM: He may be right in that, but he's only speaking of the conscious-- of his intention and of the conscious attitude of the people. Their not taking it seriously is only precisely part of this twilight of reality and fiction which I've been speaking about before. They don't take it seriously and they do. The hopes, the fears, which are aroused by advertising, operate. But they don't operate much on a conscious level.

ALVIN ACHENBAUM: I think that anybody who is really familiar with the advertising industry and with advertising agencies that produce most advertising, that that's utter nonsense. We don't have any specialized techniques for convincing people to do things that they don't want to do.

KURALT: Alvin Achenbaum, executive vice-president and director of marketing services for J. Walter Thompson, has spent most of his career in advertising research.

DRASNIN: Does the commercial, the television commercial, operate in the area of the subconscious in its attempts to influence consumer behavior?

ACHENBAUM: I've got to tell you that basically speaking, when we prepare advertising, when we think about advertising, no one is thinking along those lines. I have been in this business 22 years and I don't-- I can't remember once in all that time that anyone's said in a meeting, "Now, how are we going to prepare an advertisement that is going to get to the subconscious of the consumer?" I just think that's nonsense. It's just not done.

DRASNIN: Yet we all see countless commercials in which, through the use of some product, a man gets a woman or a woman gets a man, or our image is changed, our lives are transformed.

ACHENBAUM: Well, I think, again, to make a commercial interesting so people will watch it, it has to be somewhat dramatic or they're not going to pay any attention to it. I think in literature we often do things that are somewhat unreal. But people recognize in literature that there's a certain amount of unreality. I think they understand that there's unreality in watching a commercial.

When you try to gain attention of people-- After all, there are so many commercials and there are so many communications of every type that one must do things to gain people's attention, and some of these things that you're talking about are just merely for that purpose.

DRASNIN: Mr. Achenbaum, does the television commercial manipulate people?

ACHENBAUM: I think that what people are doing in commercials are, in some open way, trying to convince people to do something by giving them what they believe is relevant information for making that decision. Now, each advertiser doesn't give all the relevant information. He gives what he believes is relevant. No one's forcing you to watch the commercial. Nobody's bending your arms to make you do something. So in that sense, it's not manipulative. I think it's persuasive. It tries to be influential. But these are things that we do in any conversation, any communication.

I certainly think our church leaders, when they speak to us from the pulpit, are trying to influence us and persuade us. We don't consider that manipulation. I think when our politicians talk to us on television, they're trying to persuade us. They're giving us some information at the same time, but they're trying to persuade us. We don't call that manipulation. And I think when an advertiser in a 30-second commercial tries to persuade you, we shouldn't call that manipulation either. He's doing that in a rather open and honest way.

DRASNIN: Do you think that people believe what they see and hear in the television commercials?

ACHENBAUM: Yes, I think that-- Well, they don't believe everything they see or hear, any more than I believe everything I see or hear in church or in school or from a politician or at an FTC hearing. I think that we discriminate. We recognize that this is a commercial message. I think most people realize that someone is trying to sell them something and therefore they should take everything with a grain of salt.

KURALT: Pushing products has always been a hard game. Television has made selling easier for the salesmen by making it almost inescapable for us. Products are pushed in our homes now, hour after hour, day after day.

And so we have a right to ask anew about these messages which share all our waking hours. Are they reasonable? Are they logical? Are they strictly truthful? And the answer must be: not exactly, not always.

Therefore, as Mr. Achenbaum said, commercials must be taken with a grain of salt. Or, in the words of an earlier observer of the marketplace, caveat emptor: let the buyer beware. The use of reason - the thing that wrote our Constitution and which governs the best part of our lives - is not necessarily what sells best in America.

[Montage of commercial excerpts: Ajax cleanser, Mr. Clean cleanser, Clairol, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, Bufferin, Alka-Seltzer, Pepsodent and Green Giant vegetables]